

PURSUING PEACE IN A WORLD OF CONFLICT

2 Kings 6: 8-23; Romans 5: 8-10, 12: 19-20.

Today is Remembrance Sunday. Thursday will be Remembrance Day. So what is it that we're supposed to remember? The usual answer is that we remember all those who made the ultimate sacrifice – their very lives, for the sake of freedom from tyranny and oppression. This sacrifice was made because many nations, including our own, decided that we had to go to war in order to win freedom from tyranny and oppression. We decided that the sacrifice of lives was worth the price of freedom. Our goal, of course, was not to make war for war's sake. Our ultimate goal was the achievement of peace. A world of greater freedom and peace must involve some sacrifice and sometimes, the use of force. Why? Because any peace worth having has to include justice and those who are committing injustice may only bend with the pressure of force.

OK, but this day is also about grieving the loss of lives and the destruction war engenders. Maybe as we grieve and mourn the real human lives and families torn apart by war, we will be motivated to be ever more creative in our pursuit of peace. For even as there is always tyranny and oppression in the world, our instinct for war is all too often greater than our creative commitment to peace. What do I mean?

Let me begin with a story, a story that zeros in on the cost of war. Nyatuel Loklok was born in 1985 in Sudan, Africa, during a civil war. Here's how he tells his story: "When I was born in 1985, South Sudan didn't yet exist. But the south was fighting the north. My father fought as a soldier. He was killed when I was just four. Every day and night I would hear gunshots. Where I lived was a warzone. All schools were closed.

As children, we played with guns. We adopted that as our way of life to survive. By the time I was eleven, I had a militaristic mindset. I knew even then that if you didn't have a gun, someone would come and take your wife away. If you didn't have a gun, someone would take your sister away. If you didn't have a gun, someone would take your child away. Everyone had a gun.

So I joined the military. There were no other options. School was non-existent and the fighting was everywhere. My mother was a single mom and women didn't have any resources. My father could have taken care of us had he been alive, but he wasn't. I believed I would be less of a burden to my mother if I joined the military.

People died easily and in the hundreds. That's what happens in war. I saw things I cannot mention and the memories and images are always in my mind. Some soldiers committed suicide. Some killed their wives and children from the trauma. It was a very bad situation. The community also behaved like soldiers since there was no government in place. Everyone was a soldier because everyone had a gun. If you wanted to kill someone, you could kill them. There was no such thing as human rights. Life was cheap, and some lives were cheaper than others depending on your family or clan.

Peace came in 2005 when Sudan signed a peace deal that paved the way for South Sudan's independence in 2011. I'd been a soldier all those years like so many others. Our troops joined the Sudan People's Liberation Army. I wanted badly to leave the army and the fighting to go to school. But my uncle convinced me to go back into the military for more training. I got involved in military intelligence. I tried to go to school and did for a while. I got out of the military because I just couldn't take it any more. I started my own business with a loan I got from my uncles and ran it for two years until war broke out again in 2013. Everything was destroyed again and my very life was in jeopardy. And because I was out of the military I was more vulnerable than ever. All I ever wanted was peace. All I ever saw was war. Was there ever a way out of war? Was it possible to have real and lasting peace?..."

Before I continue with Nyatuel's story, let's dive into our scripture readings in search of revelatory wisdom. Nyatuel's story raises big questions, questions that must be raised every time war is declared. Is there a better way to peace? Have we been creative enough in our pursuit of peace before we have sent in our troops or planes with bombs? Have we weighed the full cost of war and decided it's a worthy price to pay for the hoped-for peace? Have we learned anything from the many conflicts we have engaged in over the years? What light may the scriptures shine for us?

The people of Israel were always at war. Waging war and defending the nation was a constant reality. One of their sworn enemies to the North was Aram (modern day Lebanon and Syria). The Arameans were fierce. Was there any way to defeat them other than the use of force? Elisha the prophet shows the way. Once again, let me say that reading bible stories literally takes the wind out of the sails of the true message. This story is not about the magical powers of a prophet. No. A prophet is a visionary. A prophet sees through divine eyes. A prophet sees a way through when ordinary folk immersed in fighting cannot see a way through other than fighting. Somehow, the prophet has the eyes and ears of spies. He knows things. He has secret information.

But how does he use such knowledge and information? He draws out the Arameans and organizes an ambush. The Arameans are trapped and surrounded. The Israelites hold all the power. Finally, they have the chance to crush their enemies once and for all.

But Elisha counsels another path to victory. Rather than destroy them by the force of violence, why not disarm them by the force of love? Rather than butcher them in their vulnerability why not feed them? A great feast is prepared for them. Totally bewildered, the Aramean troops eat, drink and rest. They return home unharmed. I wonder how they processed all this. We are not told. What we are told is this: "the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel."

Isn't this a fantastic story? Isn't this inspirational? Instead of always privileging the way of force against force, revenge against injustice and retaliation against every wrong, why not be creative and strategize in the way of love? Why not confront the enemy with flowers instead of guns? Yes, it's risky. Yes, it makes us vulnerable. Yes, we may get hurt. But if it achieves a more lasting peace with less casualties, isn't it worth the risk? Isn't that what creative diplomacy is all about? And isn't this what patience and time and repeated efforts to create bridges of dialogue are all about? It's not weakness to do this but a different kind of strength. Jumping in with guns and force may get immediate results. But can it ever lead to lasting peace without a lot of patient dialogue, compromise and... let's say it... love?

And this brings us to our reading from the apostle Paul writing to Christians in the capital city of the empire: Rome. Rome knows violence. Either you're on the winning side or you are crucified. Either you bow down to power and serve it or you suffer, lose and die because you backed the wrong side. But what happens to Jesus? And what kind of God does Jesus' fate reveal? Is Jesus a loser because he gets crucified? Is God weak because God chooses to approach us with the flowers of love rather than the gun to our necks because we are always getting things wrong and making the world a place of poverty, abuse, pain and suffering?

No. God moves through a different power and a different logic: "God proves God's love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us..." The apostle writes, and "While we were still enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of God's son..." Even though we are always involved in making war and justifying war as the only way to achieve peace, God shows us another way by exposing God's self to the consequences of our violence. God gets crucified in Jesus. God gets crucified with all the victims of war. God is in the enemy we are killing as much as God is with us trying

to inspire us to find a better way to peace, a way that must also include some forgiveness. God is in all the victims of war getting crucified as much as God is seeking to inspire us away from seeking retaliation.

So how do we deal with our enemies then? Here's what the apostle counsels: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves... if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Was Paul thinking of our Old Testament story when he wrote this? Our acts of love and kindness in return for hateful attacks, may break the cycle of hate and revenge and open the gateway to healing and reconciliation. Someone has to take the risk. Someone has to be creative enough to open up a pathway toward peace that is armed with love not violent force.

We may justify war as sometimes necessary, that killing is collateral damage, that we must stop injustice by having to commit violence... But have we cultivated enough creative love in us to patiently work for peace? Was the death of hundreds of thousand of soldiers over several world wars and other smaller wars, and the collateral damage of hundreds of thousands of civilians and destroyed villages, cities and landscapes, the best and most creative we could do for peace?

Well, let's get back to Nyatuel and his story and hear what he did. Instead of getting involved in attacking his enemies, he found safety at what is called a "Protection of Civilians site." It's a place where displaced South Sudanese people were sheltered. There, he found out about a movement called: Nonviolent Peaceforce. Nonviolent Peaceforce is a global civilian protection agency based on international human rights law. Its mission is to protect civilians in violent conflicts through non-violent peace-making strategies, working with local communities, advocating for the wider adoption of peace-making strategies in order to safeguard human lives and dignity. Nonviolent Peaceforce envisions a worldwide culture of peace in which conflicts within and between peoples are managed through nonviolent means.

Nyatuel now works for Nonviolent Peaceforce. He has begun to forgive himself. He has begun to heal from all the violence and death that has been so much in his life. He feels especially called to work with children and youth in warzones. He tries to tell them that there is another way and that fighting is not all there is. Wounds can heal and there are better ways to redeem the loss of loved ones than avenging them through violence. Nyatuel is finding his own peace by working to help others find a way to peace...

And isn't Nyatuel's story and the story of so many others so relevant for us as we seek to honour all those who gave their life because they believed a better world was possible? Remembrance Day is not a day to glory. It's a day to weep as we remember all the lives lost in the cruelty of war. It's easy for us far removed from war zones to get angry when we hear of injustices all over the world. It's far too easy for us to send drones and planes with bombs and armed soldiers. Making peace, though, is a lot more difficult. It requires a lot of patience, a lot of care and a lot of love. It requires creative diplomacy. It requires us to weigh all the lives to be affected, whether they are enemies or friends...

May we as children of God be bold in taking risks to stand up to bullies, but never with hate or violence as our weapons, but rather, the power of food and hospitality, flowers and love... And let us know always, that we are on the winning side, because the crucified and risen Christ is leading us... Amen.